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ABSTRACT

An investigation of methods to manage verbal aggression in elementary level emotionally handicapped and learning disabled students in self-contained classrooms and resource rooms is reported. The bulk of the document contains a synopsis of the guide given to the 27 master's level Florida teachers who volunteered to use the 14 recommended strategies in their classrooms. Examples and results are also provided. The techniques covered are: (1) reflection--restating what the individual has just said; (2) agreeing with part of the criticism; (3) questioning for specifics; (4) bargaining or trade off; (5) choice strategy with positive consequences; (6) problems solving; (7) reality confrontation; (8) direct/firm commands; (9) broken record--the teacher repeatedly states the command or request; (10) choice strategy with negative consequences; (11) run out--teacher keeps questioning the student; (12) distraction, redirection, or humor; (13) emotional charge release; and (14) stop gap--a temporary time out. Results show that the strategies were effective in controlling and reducing student verbal aggression and defiance. Graphs showing behavior patterns of two Ss are given. (SW)

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The Art of Managing Verbal Aggression in the Classroom

by

Clement Van Nagel, Ph.D., and
Sharian Deering-Levin, Ph.D.

Special Education Program
University of North Florida

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (62nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984)

The Art of Managing Verbal Aggression in the Classroom

Student aggression in the classroom has long been a recurring problem for teachers of exceptional students. Teachers and other professionals working closely with exceptional children must be able to effectively manage inappropriate aggressive behavior.

Aggression may be displayed verbally or physically to classmates or teachers. The aggression may have devastating effects on the learning environment, and if continued, pervasive longterm effects on a student's social maturation. A student who is aggressive to classmates elicits aggression in return, and often becomes unpopular and unhappy (Winder & Rau, 1962).

Teachers have a responsibility to help exceptional students learn to redirect the expression of their emotions in appropriate ways. In the classroom, both teacher and student benefit when a cooperative and positive climate prevails. But if a teacher fails to stop aggression in any form when it first appears, the problem may accelerate and develop into several forms of aggression. Soon, teacher and student may find themselves out of control in an unpleasant and nonproductive environment.

Verbal aggression often precedes a student's display of physical aggression. Selby and Crowley (1977) found that when teachers reinforced verbal aggression not only did its incidence rise, but so did the likelihood that verbal aggression would precipate physical aggression. Teachers must become competent in recognizing verbal aggression and in dealing with it before it leads to greater problems. The way teachers handle verbal aggression from students can either accelerate aggression and non-productive behavior or neutralize aggression. If verbal aggression is accelerated, it can lead to overt physical aggression, work stoppage, resistance, contaminate the class management system, negatively influence the behavior of classmates, and introduce a considerable amount of frustration in a teacher's day.

The detrimental effect of verbal aggression in the classroom has been demonstrated as one of the most recalcitrant maladaptive behaviors of students in a variety of classroom settings. In reviewing the literature, it was found that there were no adequate procedures for systematically stopping or mitigating verbal aggression and defiance once it had been started by a student. (Brown, Elliot, 1965; Fink, 1972; Glavin, Quay, Werry, 1971;

Gropper, Kress, Hughes, Pekich, 1968; Kosier, Severson, 1971; Lesser, 1959; Madsen, Becker, Thomas, 1968; Morse, Kysilka, Davis, 1970; Quay, 1972; Quay, Glavin, Annesley, Werry, 1972; Redl, 1957; Rich, 1980).

Observation of teachers in different classroom settings showed a definite need for a set of procedures to manage verbal aggression and defiance in the classroom. Good rapport and verbal interaction skills are the basis of successful human relations. Good relations in the classroom enable students to learn and grow in a positive instructional setting. Students with a history of expressing themselves negatively or aggressively in the classroom, however, have often also experienced difficulty in establishing positive relationships with their teachers and classmates. As a result of poor skills in establishing rapport and verbal interaction, a vicious cycle can evolve where the social skills a student must acquire to be acceptable are not acquired because he acts in socially unacceptable ways. From the teacher's perspective, a verbally aggressive student disrupts the class and may eventually require punitive action.

It was observed that in attempting to control verbal aggression and defiance, teachers use diverse methods with varying degrees of effectiveness. The term verbal aggression

is used here to encompass all types of verbal attacks, negativism, hostility, rudeness, cyncism, cursing, and sarcasm made by students and directed to their teachers or classmates.

Teachers were observed who were able to successfully handle verbal aggression and defiance from their students. The effects of their verbal behavior as it related to student verbal aggression and defiance were observed and behaviorally defined. Teacher strategies that reduced student aggression without punitive and disruptive effects to the student and class were then abstracted and synthesized into fourteen operational strategies.

The application of these strategies enable the teacher to help verbally aggressive students to redirect the expression of their feelings, wants, and needs in acceptable ways.

While it is recognized that there is a significant body of research on managing disruptive classroom behavior, the strength of these strategies lies not only in their relative simplicity, but also in their applicability to a variety of classroom settings. The strategies were generated from teachers who were effective behavior managers. They can be applied in any sequence as need dictates, and their mastery does not require elaborate

training. These strategies are not grade-, age-, or language- specific, nor do they place an undue burden on a teacher's instructional time. Being applicable to all types of students, these strategies may be adopted throughout an education program to standardize control of verbal aggression in all classrooms.

Method

Subjects. Through the years 1979 to 1982, teachers of exceptional and regular education in the northeastern part of Florida were observed regarding their methods of diffusing verbal aggresion. One of the greatest problems of these teachers was how to quickly and effectively manage verbal aggression without disrupting the entire class and with the least amount of punitive action. These teacher observations were reviewed and the most effective methods abstracted and refined into fourteen operational strategies to reduce student verbal aggression with the least punitive and disruptive effects to the student or class.

In 1982, 27 master's level teachers volunteered to use the strategies in their classrooms. The teachers worked in self contained and resource rooms for emotionally handicapped and learning disabled students in elementary schools. Each teacher selected one verbally aggressive student for application of the strategies.

Procedure. The fourteen strategies were taught to the teachers. It was recommended that they practice using the strategies in rote order until familiarity enabled them to be more flexible. When the teachers became comfortable with the strategies, they were encouraged to use them as needed, selecting those which were the most effective with each individual child and situation. It was specified that after becoming thoroughly facile in application of the strategies, each teacher was to chart the behavior of the student over a four week period using an ABAB behavior design or multiple baseline design. Instructions and a handout detailing each strategy and examples of its application were given to each teacher. Teachers were trained through graduate classes or at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida or through workshops arranged through the Teacher Education Centers of Florida.

Procedural Handout Description. A synopsis of the handout which was used in training teachers is presented below. Each strategy was demonstrated and discussed until teachers comprehended how to use it themselves.

Section I

Neutralizing and Diffusing Verbal Aggression

Introduction

The ability to develop rapport and to maintain it through verbal skills is the basis of human relations. These skills enable one to solve problems in human relations and promote social growth. Individuals who have a history of expressing themselves negatively or aggressively can be retrained to express their feelings and wants, and to fulfill their needs in acceptable ways. The following strategies are proposed to achieve this goal.

Neutralizing Aggression: Getting Prepared

Before replying to a student's negative verbal statement, ask yourself: (1) What am I about to say? (2) Will it increase the student's negativism/hostility or will it decrease it? (3) Which of the basic strategies should I use to neutralize this situation?

Communications

When communicating with students, try to be specific. Also teach them to be specific in their communication. This will eliminate much conflict. Being specific improves both the teacher's and student's chance of getting what is wanted. It also helps to keep the channels of communication open.

Example

General: The floor is messy: do something about it.

Specific: I see paper all over the floor. I want everyone to pick up the paper and later throw it in the waste basket.

When communicating with students who are aggressive, remember these points:

1. Remain as calm as possible during verbal confrontation or crisis. If you show fear or lack of control, this will accelerate the student's behavior.

2. Keep your arms a distance from the student who might accelerate to a physical attack on you, but look alternately at the person's mouth and eyes.

3. Do not react to the student's words in your body language; it exhibits rejection or hostility and may act to potentiate the problem. Be prepared to move defensively if necessary. Different students will react differently to the space between you and them. Keep the body language neutral.

4. Keep the tone of your voice low, do not shout. Try to correct students privately, when possible. Also be careful to control voice inflections.

5. Discuss specific behaviors and do not use general terms or refer to students as "good" or "bad". Keep discussion on the concrete level.

Section II

Breaking the Aggression Cycle: Strategies

Each of the strategies for dealing with verbal aggression will be defined followed by an explanation of its effect. Examples will also be provided for illustration. Strategies should be combined as needed for maximum effectiveness, but they will be discussed separately.

1. Reflection (with or without empathy)
2. Agreeing with part of the criticism
3. Questioning for specifics:
   A. For more information or clarification
   B. For more specific criticism
4. Bargaining or trade off
5. Choice strategy with positive consequences
6. Problem solving
7. Reality confrontation
8. Direct firm commands
9. Broken record
10. Choice strategy with negative consequence
11. Run out

12. Distraction, redirection or humor
13. Emotional charge release
14. Stop gap

STRATEGY 1: Reflection

Reflection is restating in fresh or similar words what the individual has just said. One result of reflection is that it gives everyone time to think. It slows down the aggressive encounter and informs the student that you are listening to what is being said. It also lets you and the student check to see if you understand what he is saying and feeling. Reflection also has a way of keeping the aggressor from restating what he has just said because it tells him you have heard him. Some aggressors will relabel a statement in depth to manipulate you. When you communicate to an individual that you have heard him, this gives him the feeling that you understand part or most of what he was trying to communicate. This gives some release to the emotional charge of the situation. Reflection can also lead to further exploration on the part of the individual. It can help him hear what he is saying. Reflection should be done in a calm, unthreatening and non-judgemental voice.

Results of reflection summarized:

1. Gives everyone time to think
2. Slows down the aggressive, attacking, language
3. Shows you (teacher) are listening
4. Checks understanding or comprehension
5. Keeps the individual from restating the negative words
6. Establishes a feeling of understanding
7. Provides a sounding board for further clarification and exploration of feelings
8. Provides an emotional release

Example

Student: I hate school. I hate you, teacher.

Teacher: You hate school and right now you're feeling hate for me.

The teacher may reflect content or affect or underlying intent. It is very important not to let the reflection technique accelerate emotions here. It should be used carefully to identify emotions and then followed up with the Emotional Charge Release Strategy (See Strategy 13) to dispel the identified emotions.

As you develop your technique of reflection you can use it with or without empathy depending on the situation. Emphasizing further develops understanding and will sometimes

create a bond between two individuals. In the examples presented below, empathy is used:

Example

Student: I hate the damn arithmetic, I'm not doing it.

Teacher: You say you hate arithmetic. Arithmetic can be hard at times. Let me help you with a few problems.

STRATEGY 2: Agreeing With Part of the Criticism

When an individual makes a verbal attack on you, try neutralizing or diffusing the attack by finding some part of the attack with which you can agree. This technique usually stops or reduces the attack by acknowledging it, and deters arguing. Students often criticize to get out of what they should be doing and may try to manipulate the situation to get a reduction in work assignment.

By agreeing with part of the criticism, you help prevent the student from repeating what was said and initiate the task at hand. Be careful not to agree with a part of the criticism that will sustain an agrument.

Results of agreeing with part of the criticism summarized:

1. Neutralizes or mitigates the attack
2. Redirects the individual to what needs to be done

3. Helps stop the individual from continuously complaining or repeating what was said

Example

Student: You're always watching me and taking off points for every little thing I do.

Teacher: At times I do watch you a lot. If you'll finish your work in the allotted time, I'll stop watching you so much.

When someone criticizes you, try this approach:

1. Restate the criticism - retention.
2. Ask for specifics - questioning.
3. Ask what the person would change or specifically what should be done.
4. If possible, ask him to show you what's expected of you.
5. If the criticism is valid, state "If I do this will your attitude or behavior toward me change favorably?"
6. If the criticism is not valid, simply say, "I will consider what you said."

STRATEGY 3: Questioning for Specifics

This technique requires the teacher to ask for specific information or feelings.

Questioning for specifics helps a student break down generalizations and assumptions which have led to poor understanding and inability to solve a problem. Students may use generalizations to get out of responsibility or for displacing their aggression or to mislead others. By asking the student to be more specific the teacher focuses on behavior and not on persons. It also enables the teacher to identify problem solving behaviors to be changed or learned. Once the student identifies and states the problem, an emotional release also takes place. This sets the stage for alternative ways of behavior or alternative problem solving.

Summary of results of questioning for specifics:

1. Gets student to be more specific and concrete
2. Focuses on problem
3. Provides an emotional release
4. Identifies strengths and weaknesses in student's problem solving abilities

Example

Student: I hate you, Mr. Smith!

Teacher: Can you tell me what it is about me that you hate?

Student: You don't know what to teach!

Teacher: What specifically don't I know how to teach?

Student: Stop bugging me!

Teacher: What is it I do that bugs you?

STRATEGY 4: Bargaining or Trade Off

In the bargaining or trade off strategy you agree to do something. Bargaining often stops an attack and it teaches the skills of negotiation.

Results of bargaining summarized:

1. Makes student stop attacking and do something more positive
2. Teaches negotiation skills
3. Reinforces delaying gratification and developing self-control

Example

Student: I'm not doing nothing today.

Teacher: Do your arithmetic and then you can work on the carburetor for five minutes.

STRATEGY 5: Choice Strategy with Positive Consequences

When a student or individual confronts a teacher with a verbal attack, the teacher can redirect the attack back to the student by requiring the student to make a choice between two alternatives where one of the alternatives is unpleasant.

Giving a student a chance to make a choice places the responsibility for his own behavior on the student. This helps the student comprehend that he will be held responsible for his behavior. He/she has to reflect to make a decision to act. This forces the student to move from an emotional level to a cognitive level in order to make the decision. The use of this choice technique is valuable when the teacher cannot think of a way out of a crisis situation. This strategy should not be overused or it will lose it effectiveness.

Results of choice with positive consequences summarized:

1. Places responsibility on the student for his/her own behavior
2. Raises level of thinking
3. Useful in extreme crisis situations

Example

Student: I'm not picking up the stuff under my desk so forget it!

Teacher: You have a choice: either pick up the paper and orange peels from under your seat or you will lose your privilege for recess.

STRATEGY 6: Problem Solving

In using problem solving the teacher teaches or guides the student through a series of steps that will help her to solve a problem. The steps are:

A. Identify or zero in on the problem--what is the problem?

B. What do I want to happen?

C. What are possible solutions?

D. Will it get me the best results?

E. Rank solutions in terms of integrity and probable success.

F. Implement the solution--set a time and place.

G. Revisit the solution--after implementation praise self if it accomplishes what I wanted it to do.

Teaching problem solving skills in interpersonal relations improves rational decision making. It teaches students to become less impulsive and more goal-oriented. Creativity can also be enhanced through this approach.

Results of problem solving summarized:

1. Improves social skills
2. Helps student identify cause-effect relations
3. Teaches student to become less impulsive
4. Enhances creativity and general problem solving ability
5. Encourages planning

Example

Student is observed getting angry because another student made a comment about her mother.

Teacher cues the student with, "Try problem solving," or works with student through problem solving process, e.g.:

Teacher: Get cool. Calm down. You're in control of you, not her. What's the problem?

Student: She's always saying things about my mama.

Teacher: What do you want to happen?

Student: I want her to stop saying things about my mama.

Teacher: What are some possible solutions?

Student: Punch her nose out; ignore her; tell the teacher; ask her to stop calling my mama names.

Teacher: What's the best solution? Rank them.

Student: I guess to tell the teacher.

Teacher: O.K., when will you do it?

Student: Next time it happens.

Teacher: After that happens, let me know. In the meantime, remember what solution you will use and stick to it.

The teacher should give the student praise for implementation and more specific praise if the solution is working. In the next example, the teacher helps the student problem solve over a longer period of time.

Example

Student sitting angrily with arms folded across chest.

Teacher: What's the problem, John?

Student: I'm not going to P.E.

Teacher: What do you want?

Student: Not to go to P.E.

Teacher: Why specifically don't you want to go?

Student: I don't have the right dress out.

Teacher: What are some solutions?

Student: There aren't any. My mama can't buy me shorts and shoes for P.E.

Teacher: What are some solutions?

Student: I could rip them off.

Teacher: Other solutions?

Student: I could make some money.

Teacher: What else?

Student: I could borrow the money from you.

Teacher: Anything else?

Student: I give up.

Teacher: Think a while. Write them out and I'll listen to your solutions when you're finished.

Student: (takes written solutions to teacher).

Teacher: I see you have a selection. Earning money is the best solution. How will you earn money?

Student: I don't know.

Teacher: Think of three ideas and then come see me. I'll try to help.

Student: Okay

STRATEGY 7: Reality Confrontation

This strategy is used when a student is engaged in behavior which would be harmful to himself or others. It brings into awareness the severe consequences of the ensuing behavior and forces the student to reconsider his potential action before the damage is done.

Results summarized:

1. Momentarily stops the impending behavior
2. Makes consequences more immediate
3. Helps the student develop foresight

Example

Student: Teacher, you can't take this knife away from me!

Teacher: John, if you get caught with that knife out, they will put you in solitary for a week. Put the knife away. Put the knife away. I don't want to see you in solitary confinement.

STRATEGY 8: Direct/firm Commands

Direct firm commands should be used when the student has responded well to them in the past. This strategy should be used sparingly within a crisis situation as it leaves the student no options and does not encourage responsible decision making. Peer struggles should be solved on a one-to-one basis in a private setting. If this technique fails, you may well be confronted with overt physical aggression.

Direct/firm commands often get immediate compliance if the teacher is in control and the students have a history of responding to such commands. If the teacher overuses this strategy, it will quickly lose its effect.

Example

Student: I'm going to whack you over the head with this broom!

Teacher: Bill, put the broom down.

STRATEGY 9: Broken Record

This technique requires the teacher to repeatedly state the command or request.

The intended result of this strategy is to get the student to comply by repeating the request or command. This technique is usually employed when a student does not

respond to a direct request or command. It is important for the teacher to remain calm in voice and action when using this technique. It may also have to be followed by another strategy if the student is very stubborn.

Example

Teacher: Sit down in your seat, Anthony.

Student: No!

Teacher: (Teacher repeats five times and then uses another technique)

STRATEGY 10: Choice Strategy With Negative Consequences

This strategy is similar to Strategy 5. It forces a student to make a choice, but both alternatives are unpleasant to the student. One of the alternatives, however, is more unpleasant than the other one.

This strategy also places responsibility on the student for his/her own behavior. It is useful in extreme crisis situations.

Example

Student: I'm not going to sit down!

Teacher: You have a choice to either sit down or I'll have to send for the assistant principal. You have 30 seconds to make your decision.

STRATEGY 11: Run Out

Run out is a strategy where the teacher keeps questioning the student to: (1) identify the real problems a student is experiencing or (2) to get the student to stop constantly criticizing and complaining. In the second case, questioning continues until the student criticism is depleted or the charged emotions are released.

Extinction of the complaint or criticism is the result of this strategy.

Example

Student: I hate your voice.

Teacher: What else?

Student: You dress funny.

Teacher: What else?

Student: You have a pimple on your chin.

Teacher: What else?

Student: You are real mean!

Teacher: What else?

Student: ...That's all, I guess...

Teacher: Now, what's really bugging you?

Student: I don't know - you just make me mad. I don't like this book. It's too hard.

You can tell when you have gotten to the real issue or to what's bothering the student when you see the student sigh or relax, and let out a breath. This usually indicates that the pent-up emotion has been released. Problem-solving is a good strategy to follow up at this point.

STRATEGY 12: Distraction, Redirection or Humor

The strategies of distraction and redirection or humor entail that the teacher either verbally or physically distract the student from the issue at hand. This can be done in many ways, but must usually be individualized for each student.

Distraction, redirection or humor temporarily distracts the student from the aggressive situation, permitting a reduction in anxiety, stress, and deceleration of attacking and aggression responses.

Example

Student: I'm really getting mad at Mike! I hate his guts! I feel like going over and breaking this bottle over his head!

Teacher: Do you like that brand of soft drink?

Student: Yeah, Mike's not going to like it when I break it over his head!

Teacher: Let's go get one of those soft drinks and have some lunch and work out a solution to your problems with Mike.

STRATEGY 13: Emotional Charge Release

This strategy is employed when pent-up aggression or hostility keeps motivating the student to attacking behavior. This is done by having the student tell his feelings, write them out, or draw or use puppets to dramatize his latest feeling of aggression.

Releasing aggression through talking, writing, drawing pictures or puppeting discharges aggression in acceptable ways.

Example

Two students are shouting loud remarks at each other. They are starting to push each other.

Teacher: I see Alice and Sue pushing. Alice, go to your seat and write or draw how you feel about Sue and tell why. Then do problem solving. I'll come by and listen to you when you're finished.

Teacher: Sue, go to your seat and write or draw how you feel about Alice and tell why. Then do problem solving. I'll come by and listen to you, too, when you're finished.

STRATEGY 14: Stop Gap

This strategy is used when there is an argument between the teacher and the student's anger is accelerating. The stop gap strategy requires the teacher to tell the student that they both need a temporary time out from each other until their feelings calm down.

The stop gap strategy gives both the teacher and student time and distance from each other to bring their emotions under control without further aggression or potential violence.

Example

Student's voice is getting louder and louder.

Teacher: I feel/see we're getting louder and angrier. Let's take a five minute break and we'll talk again.

Teacher: I feel that we are not getting anywhere at this time. Let's both write down how we feel and what we want and then exchange notes in ten minutes.

Conclusion

In using the above strategies the teacher needs to exercise the intelligence and judgement to select strategies which are best for specific problems with

individual students. This judgement comes from practice and experience in using the strategies. In social situations there are many ways to correctly approach students as you help them redirect their behavior. Teachers must keep trying even if some strategies aren't successful with all students. Teachers must adapt to the needs of their students. The important thing for a teacher to remember is that the ultimate goal is to diffuse or neutralize attacking verbal statements and teach new, appropriate ways of responding that will enable others and the aggressive individuals to express themselves in socially acceptable ways. That will result in increased problem solving and reduction in stress, anxiety, and the disintergration of communication. Remember, as long as you are communicating you are usually reducing or lessening attacking verbal or physical aggression.

Results and Data Collection

The results of the study evidenced that the strategies in the model were effective in controlling and reducing student verbal aggression and defiance. Two randomly selected case studies which are representative of the efficacy of the strategies are presented in the following graphs.

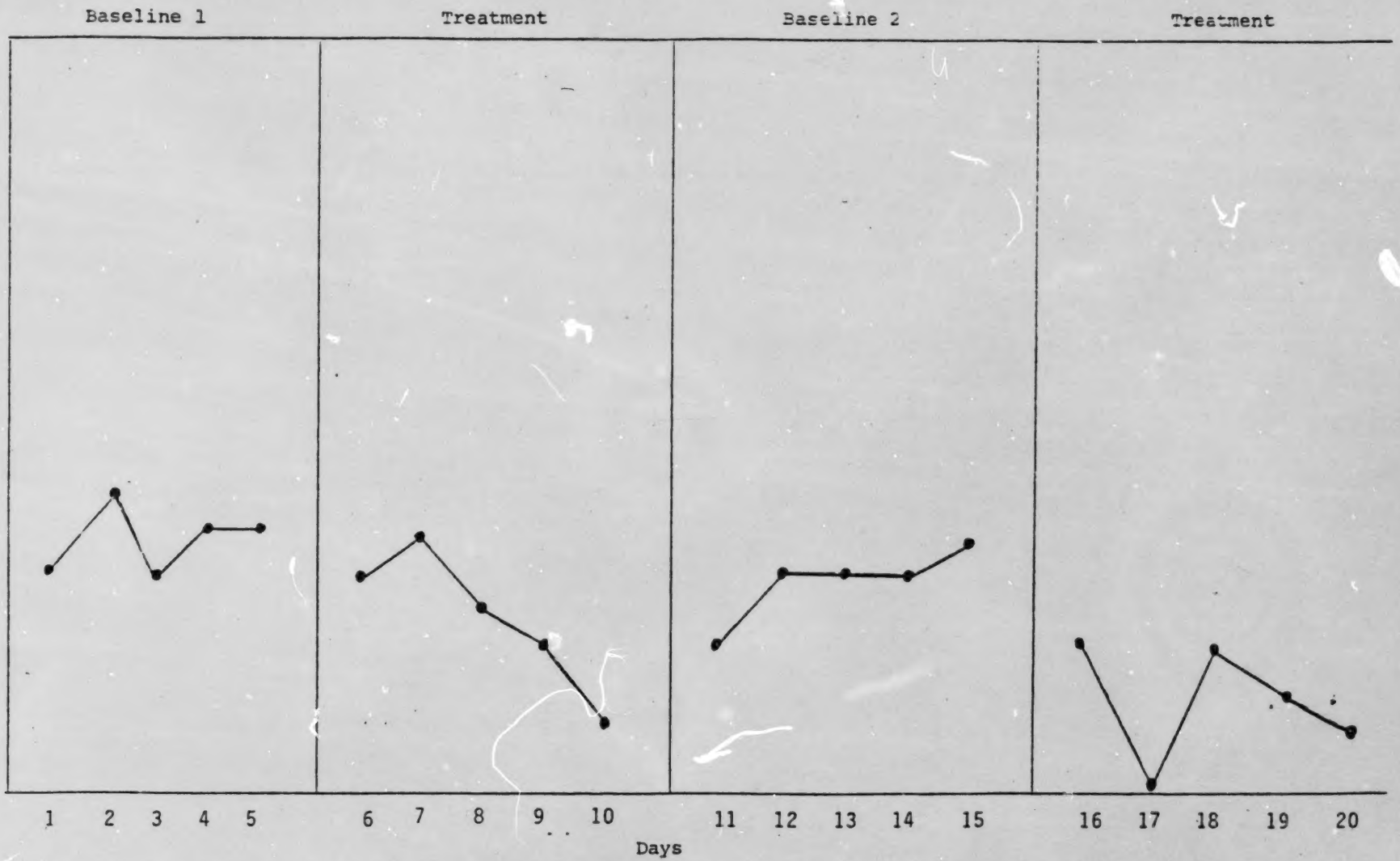
In each case the undesirable verbal behavior was observed and charted for four consecutive week (see baseline 1 on Figures 1 and 2). The strategies were employed and verbal aggression decreased (see treatment 1 on Figures 1, and 2). When the strategies were withdrawn, an increase in verbal aggression was noted (see baseline 2 on Figures 1, and 2). The strategies were reinstituted and verbal aggression again decreased (see treatment 2 on Figures 1, and 2).

At termination of the study many teachers incorporated the strategies into the management system for all students in their classes.

Discussion

The use of the fourteen strategies to control or neutralize verbal aggression is a viable, effective, and efficient approach for the teacher of exceptional students. The strategies can be used in both self contained and resource room settings with both elementary and secondary level students to effectively diffuse verbal attacks, negativism, hostility, cursing, cynicism, rudeness and sarcasm with minimal punitive and disruptive effects to the student or class. The authors invite others to share with them any research and/or experience with the use of these strategies, including modifications or improvements to them.

FIGURE 1: Controlling Verbal Aggression of a Fourteen Year-Old Male



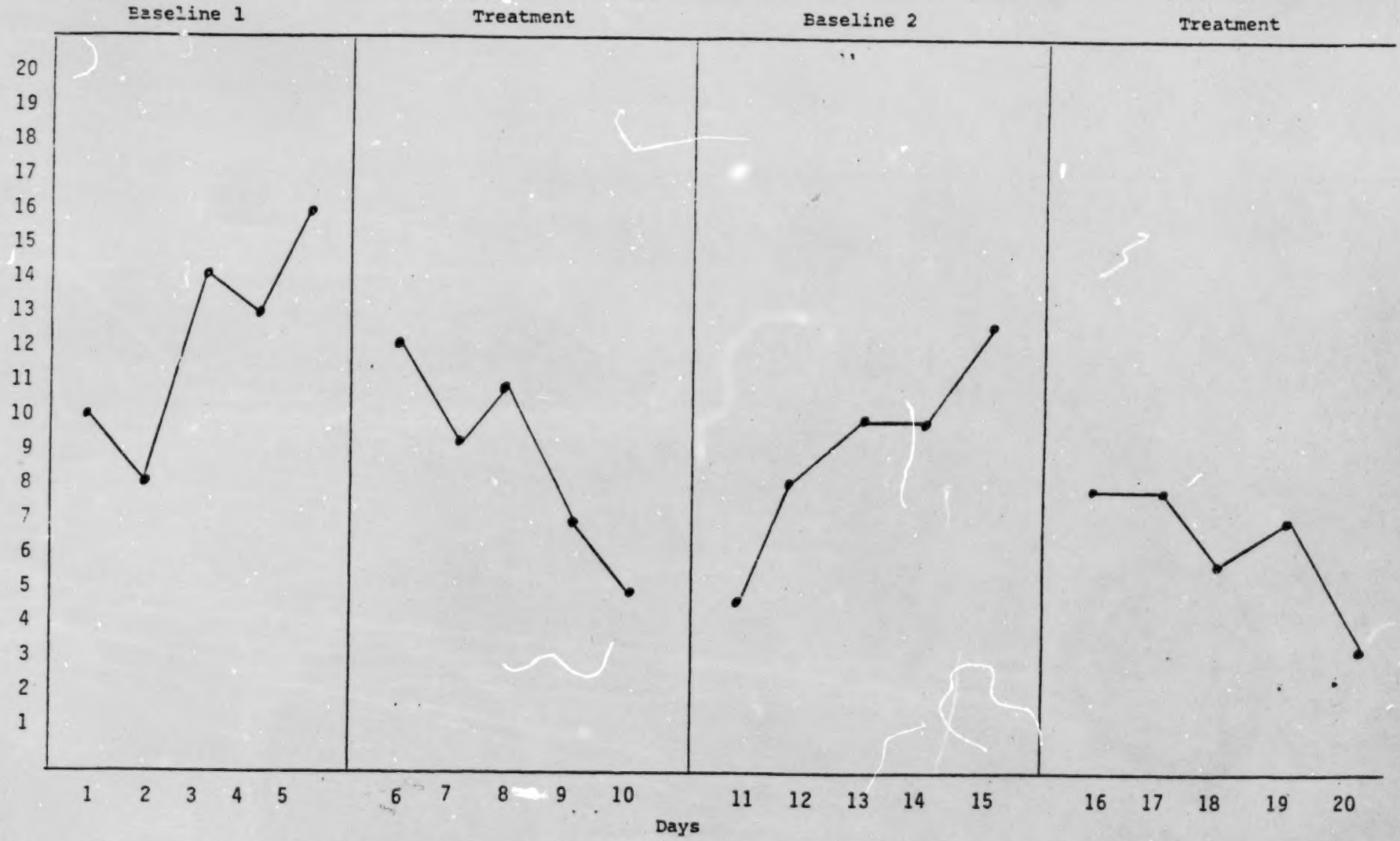
ecific Problem: Student refuses to do work. Constantly saying: "I won't do this; you can't make me do this. I hate this stuff."

ident Initials: J.C. Age: 14 Type of Class: E.H. Date: Oct. 3-28, 1983 (45-min class)

esearch Teacher: M.D. Recording Procedure:

liability Checks: 92%

FIGURE 2: Controlling Verbal Aggression of a Ten Year-Old Female



cific Problem: Student verbally threatens others including the teacher

ent Initials: M.S. Age: 10 Type of Class: E.H. Date: Feb. 6, 1983 - March 4, 1083

earch Teacher: B.R. Recording Procedure: (9-11:30 ea day)

iability Checks: 96%

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